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The No-Dead War
The Price and Promise of America's Changing Attitudes Toward Casualties

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Our volunteer military is the world's finest
President Clinton, *in his 9/15/94 address to the nation on Haiti intervention*

Why did the President feel compelled to qualify the military as "volunteer" in his discussion of the risks and merits of U S intervention in Haiti? Perhaps this word appears innocently Or even as a mark of national pride But some observers inside and outside the military discern a more subtle, even sinister connotation Volunteers, their argument goes, may be more easily committed to combat situations by our nation's civilian leadership than their drafted brethren were a generation ago, since a voluntary career in the military is presumed to entail acknowledged risks This "you knew the job was dangerous when you took it" approach -- whether it in fact or not colors National Command Authority thinking about the employment of our forces -- is sufficiently real in the minds of many senior military officers to elicit their public and spirited criticism

Surely policy makers in any democracy must feel themselves constrained by the fear of casualties in limited war and less-than-war situations In the United States, these constraints occupy a special position in the pantheon of political idolatry, we are arguably more concerned about casualties among our soldiers than any of our Western allies, or indeed than any other government that comes to mind anywhere Nothing to be ashamed of here But, beyond the rhetoric, how meaningful a constraint on policy makers *is* this concern? Does it override other, perhaps weightier national security concerns?

And what of the argument that some see as implicit in the President's statement and that inspires the generals' rejection, that volunteer blood is somehow cheaper? Is this the inevitable result of America's smaller families and the "de-responsibilitization" of our society? May we even say that this thinking flows logically, if somewhat tangentially, from the effort to "out-source" and privatize the military establishment to the extent possible? Perhaps In any case, this debate seems certain to grow in volume and vigor as we head toward the 21st century and its false promise of the "no-dead war"

This paper will argue that our national obsession over casualties in combat does constrain policy makers in important ways, and that we should understand and acknowledge those constraints forthrightly Flowing from this attitude are important ramifications for our military and our nation in terms of force structure, doctrine and procurement We also should be candid about these ramifications Our focus on casualties is not static, developments within our society and the currents of our history have altered the way we think about combat deaths These changes are likely to make it even more difficult for the United States to play our great power role with the desired steadiness in the decades ahead

I

> *One thing that can still be counted on is resistance to the Draft Personally, I think this is regrettable I believe a citizen's army with no preferential deferments is not only the only just system but ultimately the only sound defense, and reenactment of the Draft the only way we will be taken seriously by the antagonist and -- if we believe national defense is so urgent -- by ourselves*
>
> Barbara Tuchman *America's Security in the 1980s*[1]

Barbara Tuchman probably was in the minority in 1982 with the above view, and certainly she would find few allies in arguing for a return to universal conscription -- without deferments, at that -- in 1996 The end of the draft in 1973 occasioned much worry and debate at the time, but intervening events and changes in American society have conspired to all but kill the notion of conscription America's armed forces today are solidly professional, to listen to current senior Army, Navy, Air Force or Marine officers tell it (such as the National War College student body), the quality of the all-volunteer force is markedly improved over the Vietnam era, with its racial, drug and indiscipline problems that often took on explosive proportions

It is, I would argue, an article of faith among America's political leaders and the American public at large that today's armed forces are smaller, smarter, and generally more capable, precisely *because* they are all-volunteer There is an unmistakable pride inherent in the notion that the nation's sons and daughters seek out the opportunity to wear the uniform and defend the nation's interests around the globe In short, America

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[1] Barbara Tuchman in *America's Security in the 1980s* Christopher Bertram, ed (New York, St Martin's Press, 1982)

today is high on the volunteer military

Committing those same sons and daughters to combat or near-combat is a wrenching national decision We need look no farther than the 1973 War Powers Act and the intense, ongoing debate surrounding its provisions for signs of the extreme political sensitivity of these decisions The perception that America can only with great difficulty tolerate any military casualties underlies much of the political argumentation surrounding the employment of forces abroad Indeed, the American people themselves seem to believe that we are hypersensitive to the sight of "body bags coming home"

But as Benjamin Schwarz explained in his *Casualties, Public Opinion and U S Military Intervention,* the nexus between combat deaths and public opinion is much more complex than we tend to think In fact, it is the perception that not enough is being done to bring our military engagements abroad to a swift and victorious conclusion that seems to agitate Americans, more than the experience of casualties in those engagements From the Civil War through the present, Schwarz notes that, although initial go-to-war decisions are the subject of intensive scrutiny and debate, once committed, Americans' tolerance for casualties outstrips our tolerance for defeat

> *During the Civil War, popular support for Lincoln and the Union effort ebbed and flowed not in response to casualties but because of public perception that decisive action was or was not underway When the conflict was taken to the enemy, public support for Lincoln increased, regardless of the casualties incurred This public preference is not limited to war fought from 1861-1865* [2]

Schwarz' analyses of Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War are even more telling True, respondents to polls consistently indicate growing disenchantment with the decision to go to war or to intervene, as casualties mount But this misses the point, polling data indicates more relevantly that popular sentiment in favor of withdrawal or disengagement does *not* correlate to casualties Instead, growing casualty rates tend to elicit a growing desire to *escalate* the conflict, to "finish it off" decisively, including, presumably, with the use of nuclear weapons if necessary

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[2] Benjamin C Schwarz *Casualties, Public Opinion, and U S Military Intervention* (Santa Monica, RAND, 1994)

(But what of, say, Somalia? Clearly, the American public exerted tremendous pressure for a withdrawal of our forces from Mogadishu following the disastrous Ranger encounter with Ali Mohammed Aided's forces in pursuit of his capture We *might* say Schwarz' analysis breaks down here -- except for the fact that Somalia was a hybrid operation with no expectation of combat deaths given the humanitarian premise of the engagement Once committed, it was perhaps difficult for Americans to favor "escalation" before withdrawal in the face of difficulties Escalation to what, after all? Hot meals for everyone? Schwarz' conclusions are intact, it seems, despite Somalia)

These popular reactions appear to be consistent, regardless of whether the actions involve conscripts (Korea, Vietnam), or volunteers (the Gulf) Are the views of civilian policy makers different? Is there a subtle, even sinister willingness to put volunteers in harm's way faster than draftees? Many senior military officials seems to think so Former Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage, for one, finds a "mercenary" character to the evolving practice of U S military intervention in the post-Cold War world

> *Whether or not the United States should deploy fighting forces to Bosnia, Haiti, Rwanda or other potential hot spots should not depend upon the manner in which people enter military duty Columnists and politicians who argue that volunteer military service somehow 'lowers the bar' for armed intervention really miss the point They are saying, in essence, that the life of a volunteer is somehow less valuable than that of a conscript* [3]

Armitage is not alone A number of active duty officers holding senior positions have taken the initiative to speak out against this very same "volunteer blood is cheaper" argument that they perceive behind Administration decision-making, or perhaps civilian decision-making in general This may be an inevitable result of the increased reliance on the military for operations other-than-war in pursuit of national objectives, the employment of choice for today and for the foreseeable future More to the point, though, Armitage's criticism probably has more to do with his objection to the *reasons* for deployment -- in Bosnia, Haiti and Rwanda -- than with the alleged cavalier deployment of volunteers simply because they're volunteers

What is at issue here is not so much the blood of our volunteers, it seems, as the debate over what the

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[3] Richard L Armitage, Volunteer vs Draft Debate Misses the Mark' *Navy Times*, 11/23/94, p 29

President, the military or the public find to be worth dying for This is not a casual distinction, and bears some comment Throughout the decades of the Cold War, the U S had a conscripted force for roughly half the time, and a volunteer force for roughly half the time Our readiness to fight the Soviet Union and presumably our willingness to die in doing so spanned both eras, draft and volunteer Broadly speaking, we enjoyed a solid national consensus on this bedrock issue The days of such certainty and clarity are gone The combat missions lying ahead for our armed forces *may* include one more major, conventional, (Napoleonic?) battle -- against North Korea -- but little else that is likely to be recognizable by the standards of our military history thus far We can anticipate smaller, more complex, and less morally unambiguous conflicts than we were handed in the Gulf War The political fight over military intervention abroad in these new conflict situations will be intense, reflecting different perceptions, ultimately, over what is worth dying for The threshold is high, and being pushed ever higher, by Armitage and others But the debate over whether it is *too* high is clouded by efforts to gauge this or that administration's volunteer blood calculus -- an important question, but one that misses the point

What is the foundation of this national obsession with the blood of Americans? (An obsession, by the way that extends beyond the lives of our military, though this may be the most visible and obvious caste) Thomas Friedman of the New York Times argues that it is the American character that glorifies individual liberties and the individual citizen above all else We need make no apology for this noble tenet, but we must understand the ramifications Friedman contrasts our individualism with the statism of France "President Jacques Chirac threatened to withdraw French troops from Bosnia not because they were being killed, but, he said, because they were being 'humiliated' States are humiliated, individuals are killed "[4] But Friedman need not have stopped with France, the U S must be unique among the present-day great powers with our very low tolerance for individual combat deaths For that matter, we may be unique throughout the history of nation-states

Does this put the U S at a disadvantage in the business of promoting and defending our vital

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[4] Thomas L Friedman, The No-Dead War" *The New York Times*, 8/23/95 p F11

national interests? Well, yes Our obsession with casualties is well-known, if incompletely understood, by our allies and adversaries It probably results in the specific targeting of Americans in circumstances where they might otherwise simply be another, albeit the most powerful, among world actors We do not help ourselves in this regard, with our public, national gnashing of teeth over prospective casualties before undertaking any operation "I don't want to see the corpse(s) of Americans dragged through another city like they did at the war in Mogadishu," said Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) at a late 1995 Congressional hearing on Bosnia [5] Senator William Cohen (R-ME) echoed these concerns "When body bags come home, as they're likely to do, there will be tremendous pressure " to bring American troops home before their mission is completed [6]

Friedman detects another problem, related to Schwarz' research and Armitage's complaint above as we have seen, Americans, once aroused by their leaders and convinced that some moral crusade or truly vital national interest (triumph over the Axis in WWII, anticommunism in Korea and Vietnam, anti-despotism and oil security in the Gulf) is worth fighting for, tend to want to see the matter through to conclusion In the absence of some moral imperative, though, and failing a clear danger to our interests, the initial commitment of forces gets tougher and tougher The unseemly and counterintuitive rigid Bosnia time line that President Clinton was compelled to structure reflects this problem Yet it will continue to be incumbent on us to commit American blood if we expect others to commit their own -- and surely we would prefer to meet our international challenges with our allies, rather than alone Friedman notes that the U S is a world-class "big war" power, but maladroit at "small wars" Since it is the latter we seem destined to face in the years ahead, we must anticipate serious questions about our ability to continue to lead the global community, in the fashion we have since World War II

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[5] Art Pine, ' Wishing for a War without Blood' *Los Angeles Times*, 12/13/95, p A1

[6] Ibid

II

We have worked hard to increase the ferocity and lethality of American forces In addition to the skill with which they are used, we have vastly increased the amount of munitions expended per combat-exposed soldier As a result, our battle death rate has been cut in half

Harvey Sapolsky and Sharon Weiner, *Across the Board*[7]

Though this line of thinking may be uncomfortable, we must also consider how our relative intolerance for casualties has skewed and will continue to skew our defense resource allocations Our forces are high-technology intensive, and slated to become even more so The U S Army talks of "digitizing" the battlefield The U S Air Force and other USG agencies deployed equipment worth literally billions of dollars in the successful search for downed Air Force Captain Scott O'Grady in Bosnia These capabilities, present and future, are impressive They were, in the case of Captain O'Grady, perhaps life-saving But at what cost? And are these the capabilities we are likely to rely on in fighting the next century's wars, or will they simply give us the ability to fight the last century's wars better? And don't our high-tech priorities increasingly sacrifice readiness, training and, ultimately, force structure in our era of tighter resources? Our determination to make our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines the best equipped and the safest may also make them the most irrelevant for tomorrow's conflict

Eric Schmitt, writing in the New York Times, sees a potential leadership problem as well Our intolerance for casualties often is expressed in excruciating investigations into events that may have led to combat fatalities (Not to mention accidental deaths, reflecting this, it is reputed that CJCS General Shalikashvili is particularly interested in accidental and training deaths, to say nothing of combat deaths He is to be called, reportedly, at any time with such reports) The Congress is frequently and heavily involved in such ' oversight" The conclusions that young Army captains, Navy lieutenants and the like may reasonably draw are those of caution, not initiative "We now have people being taught how to be cautious, not how to be bold The lesson out of that seems to be don't let anything go wrong," says Admiral Stanley R Arthur, who commanded U S forces in the Gulf War [8] This flies in the face of long-established doctrine favoring

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[7] Harvey Sapolsky and Sharon Weiner, "War without Casualties" *Across the Board*, October 1994, p 39

[8] Eric Schmitt, The Military s Getting Queasier About Death" *The New York Times* 8/6/95, p E5

independence and initiative on the battlefield, essential force multipliers that underpinned our planners' thinking on combat against much larger but less nimble Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces in Europe throughout the past 40 years

Sapolsky and Weiner suggest an even more extreme case a growing unwillingness on the part of civilian (and therefore military) leaders to accept *enemy* casualties The result is an increasing effort to devote weapons research and development resources to "nonlethal" or "minimally lethal" arms Reportedly, DOD is spending $1 billion currently on these concepts [9] In Kuwait, during Operation Desert Storm, reporters were rarely if ever shown footage of the Iraqi dead, instead, viewers were treated to technologically stunning and subliminally "clean" precision-guided-munitions attacks on key installations or targets -- with nary a dead Iraqi in sight President Bush, in describing his war termination thinking in retrospect, said " we weren't in the business of slaughter "[10] This begs the question, of course in war, exactly what business *are* we in?

III

I just joined the army to get an education I never expected to have to fight!

Gulf War vignette[11]

Schwarz' research indicates fairly steady patterns of behavior with regard to casualties over the past 150 years in America Although the initial go-to-war decision may be the subject of much debate and criticism, featuring most notably concerns about casualties, the public tends to be able to sustain the flow of casualties if convinced the war or near-war is being prosecuted ably, effectively, and with an eye to rapid victory But there are signs this behavior may be under assault by the demographics of late 20th century United States From 1970 to 1993, the rate of births per 1,000 Americans dropped from 18 4 to 15 7 In 1950, the comparable rate was 24 1[12] As family size has steadily declined, sociologists confirm that parents'

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[9] Sapolsky and Weiner, p 42

[10] Ibid , p 42

[11] Described in Pine's ' Wishing for a War without Blood", *Los Angeles Times*, 12/13/95, p A1

[12] Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995 (Washington, Department of Commerce, 1995)

unwillingness to see their (only?) child sent into a combat situation has risen [13] For the larger families of previous generations, the loss of a son was, allegedly, less catastrophic when more siblings were on hand Today, the contention is that maternal and paternal instincts erect a much higher barrier over which the reputed national interest must pass before the only son heads off to combat -- as a volunteer or not And, as we already have noted, the national interest will become even less nimble and sure of foot in the 21st century of ethnic and religious conflict, chronic low-level instability, and the requirements of coalition and alliance operations

Inside the military, sociologists point to the increased incidence of married couples among the ranks This too has lent a chill to the acceptability of casualty risks for today's service men and women Is it really easier for the nation to contemplate the loss of a single man than of a husband and/or father, or of a brother than of an only son? Some researchers believe so

And -- to put it bluntly -- where's the glory in dying for one's country these days anyway? Though our Vietnam dead have belatedly received the honors common decency would say they deserved, there was little popular nobility in the cause for which these Americans died *at the time of the dying* Selflessness in general, not just on the field of combat, is a national attribute in eclipse, most would say I think this is a part of the larger phenomenon in America today of what we may call "de-responsibilization" This phenomenon plays itself out in myriad ways in our daily lives, each of us can tell a story or two of particularly egregious abdication of personal or professional responsibility we have witnessed Contributing to this is our fixation on accountability -- someone else's -- often to be enforced via a lawsuit in the civilian world This is not a social climate in which to favor the supreme sacrifice which must be the ethos of our (or any other) military

The "no-dead war" imperative may even lead us in a new direction, one that paradoxically harkens back to the pre-Napoleonic era in warfighting the mercenary army If we stretch our thinking a bit, can we not see this as a logical if somewhat tenuous extension of the current drive to "privatize" and 'out-source" key administrative aspects of the armed forces? These current efforts are designed to save resources and shed

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[13] Ibid

the military of all but its unique competencies Personnel or payroll or housing functions, for instance, may be more efficiently and effectively performed by private contractors, with appropriate military inputs and overall direction and control But if our most precious resource is the lives of our soldiers -- and surely it must be -- then how far a leap is it to envision a force structure featuring American officers (providing the "inputs, overall direction and control") and volunteer, *foreign national* soldiers, sailors and marines?

One could even envision a special avenue for immigration to the United States for those who are willing to enlist in our notional, 21st century, out-sourced armed forces Those of us who have manned American visa lines at Foreign Service posts abroad know that there is no shortage of able bodied young men (and, presumably, women) who would happily do just that, if the opportunity were presented The pool from which such volunteers might be drawn numbers in the many millions, around the world The casualties such a force might suffer would be non-American, but the benefit would accrue strictly to U S national interests

One can easily punch holes in this scenario, not least for the affront such a scheme would represent to today's American values of human dignity, national pride and self-esteem, and fairness But will these be the same values for tomorrow's America? Can we really discard such thinking, given the intensity of concern over casualties in our military and the looming gap between our national interests abroad and our national commitment to securing them at home?

IV

Since President Teddy Roosevelt sent a punitive Naval expedition against the Sultan of Morocco for the kidnaping of a single putative American, the world has known that we hold our citizens' lives particularly dear once they leave our shores So dear, in fact, that now, almost 100 years later, we find it very difficult to even contemplate losing the lives of our military volunteers in defending the global interests that Teddy Roosevelt only glimpsed in his jingoistic vision As a result, our leadership of the world community is more fragile than our sheer size and power might indicate And our military means and resources are skewed toward absolutely minimizing casualties, at the cost, conceivably, of dizzy ops tempos, less training and -- paradoxically -- lower readiness Fine, as long as we perceive and acknowledge these costs

What is it in the 21st century for which Americans will be asked to die? Odds are the answer will

surprise us And many probably will find it not worth dying over at all Whatever the outcome, this hard truth is inescapable when American blood becomes too valuable to spill, we will find ourselves in the twilight of our world role

Additional Materials Used

John B Keely, editor, *The All-Volunteer Force and American Society* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1978)